

Downing Street Blues

Michael Gove

LONDON—Normally, when politicians make predictions, events conspire to make them look foolish. But there was one forecast from a politician in 2007 which has been uncannily accurate. Presciently, precisely and painfully so.

Interviewed on the BBC at the beginning of last year, British minister David Miliband reflected on the unpopularity of the then Prime Minister, and tried to suggest that unpopularity was just a feature of incumbency. In a year, he predicted, people would be saying, “Wouldn’t it be great to have that Blair back because we can’t stand that Gordon Brown.”

Less than a year later, Miliband is Foreign Secretary, sitting at Gordon Brown’s right hand, and both find their government mired in unpopularity, barely at the level in the opinion polls which marked Blair’s nadir. And what makes their position all the more tragically ironic is the casual assumption, previously held by so many in their party, that a simple change in personnel at the top and a new direction in foreign policy would be the basis for a political revival.

In the waning days of Blair’s term, the standard view on the Left chalked Labour’s unpopularity up to his support for the Iraq war. And the breaking point for many in the party, when they began openly to agitate for Blair’s removal, came when he showed sympathy for Israel when it was attacked by Hezbollah in the summer of 2006. Blair’s fall is thus seen as intimately linked with his positioning on foreign affairs. And the expectation within the Labour party and the broader Left was that Gordon Brown would win back popularity by charting a different course.

Brown, for his part, has responded to this trend. From the moment he took over, he sought to signal a different direction in foreign policy, one which explicitly acknowledged the legitimacy of the criticism of Blair from the Left.

So Mark Malloch Brown, a United Nations functionary who had been sharply critical of Blair over Iraq and Lebanon, was made a Foreign Office minister. His new Cabinet colleague Douglas Alexander, freshly appointed to the post of International Development Secretary, flew to Washington to give a speech in which he was critical of using “military might” rather than alliances as a measure of achievement. The speech was interpreted, understandably, as a further distancing of the new Brown team from the Bush doctrine.

True, Brown panicked when the speech was reported in particularly negative terms, and authorized a briefing in which Alexander was slapped down. But Alexander was only reflecting Brown’s own inner instincts, as the world saw later when Brown himself visited the U.S. for his first summit meeting with President Bush. In place of the personal warmth of the Bush-Blair relationship, the new British premier opted for a rigidly impersonal approach. This passionless



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take on the “special relationship” was supposed to signal to the British Left that Brown shared their distaste for the cowboy in the White House, while also reassuring middle England that he nevertheless knew how to maintain a functioning working relationship with the world’s largest power. But the impression left in most people’s eyes was of a man who, having coveted leadership all his life, now seemed incapable of giving a lead. Whereas Blair’s Atlanticism was born from conviction, Brown’s seemed wholly shaped by calculation.

And it is calculation, of a peculiarly inept kind as it happens, which has marked all of Brown’s other foreign policy positions. On Iraq, his principal aim has been to signal to domestic opinion his willingness to bring troops home as quickly as possible. So anxious was Brown to communicate that message that he tried to overshadow the Conservative Party Conference by making an announcement on troop reductions, only for subsequent analysis to show he had misled the public about the real level of withdrawal to take place.

Because Brown has been so fixated on the electoral front, he has failed to effectively articulate the importance of Iraq to the broader war against Islamist terror. And, by making his sole metric of success the speed with which he can draw down troops, an unflattering comparison can be drawn with the series of successes, in reducing casualties and containing al-Qaeda, secured by the U.S. “surge.”

On the other principal front of the War on Terror, Afghanistan, he has been scarcely more impressive. Just before Parliament broke for the Christmas recess, Brown’s team suggested that he would be willing to “talk to the Taliban.” But when Brown actually made his statement to the House of Commons, no such offer of negotiation was made. Presumably, Brown had been told in the interim that going public with a desire to talk peace, while British troops were in the midst of intense warfighting, would only signal to the Taliban a fatal lack of resolve at a crucial time. Nevertheless, press reports at the end of 2007 claimed British officials are already negotiating with the Taliban. If correct, this would cast doubt not only on the prime minister’s trustworthiness, but on his judgment.

The West’s enemies have developed a sophisticated understanding of when, and how, leaders lack the resolution for the long struggle against jihadist violence. And it is striking, in that respect, how poorly Brown compares with his predecessor in his understanding of how to show steel in response. Whereas Blair understood, and explained clearly in his speeches, the ideological roots of Islamism, Brown has never given a proper explanation—of the kind his office demands—of the nature of the jihadist threat. This is true even though, after terrorist attacks were thwarted during his first weeks in office, Brown had the perfect platform to outline the totalitarian nature of the ideology, which can make killers out of doctors. He chose, however, to retreat behind tired old boilerplate.

Indeed, in a perverse sense, the policy positions adopted by the Brown government may be furthering jihadi interests. Brown argues consistently that it is through addressing material poverty that terrorism can be beaten. Addressing global poverty is indeed an urgent issue. But Brown’s analysis risks playing into the jihadist narrative that their cause is sustained by global injustice.

Given how far Brown has traveled from the Blair position on foreign affairs, and done so with such little electoral benefit to show for it, perhaps it is worth

reassessing the Blair legacy. Rather than failing abroad, perhaps it is the failure of the Labour government to keep Britain competitive, the books balanced and the public services improving which has led to unpopularity at the polls. And while Blair was leading on foreign policy over the last few years, was it not the brooding figure in the Treasury, Brown himself, who was happy to style himself “domestic overlord”?

Gordon Brown may soon find, therefore, that the record which finally sinks Labour is not his predecessor’s, but his own.

